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# Literacy and Cultural Differences: An Afterword

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## Literacy and Cultural Differences: An Afterword

### **Abstract**

Within the educational research community, social, cultural, and linguistic interpretations of group differences have become increasingly prevalent. Whether one considers infant care, women at work, or IQ scores, there is no shortage of research that describes the various social attributes that "must have" led to such differences. As a number of chapters in this volume have indicated, a cultural explanation seems far more palatable—and allows for more societal intervention—that predecessor biological (read racial) claims. Yet, what do we really know about how societal interventions can take place effectively in a given educational domain or for individuals with different cultural and ethnic experiences? One obvious conclusion from the chapters in this volume is that literacy work across ethnic diversity needs a grounding in both cultural diversity and in-depth cultural understanding. The differences in literacy development within the African-American community, and as contrasted with other ethnic groups in the United States, are becoming increasingly clear.

### **Disciplines**

Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education | Curriculum and Instruction | Education | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | Educational Methods | Educational Psychology | Language and Literacy Education | Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education



# ***Literacy and Cultural Differences: An Afterword***

***Daniel A. Wagner***  
***University of Pennsylvania***

Within the educational research community, social, cultural, and linguistic interpretations of group differences have become increasingly prevalent. Whether one considers infant care, women at work, or IQ scores, there is no shortage of research that describes the various social attributes that "must have" led to such differences. As a number of chapters in this volume have indicated, a cultural explanation seems far more palatable—and allows for more societal intervention—that predecessor biological (read racial) claims. Yet, what do we really know about how societal interventions can take place effectively in a given educational domain or for individuals with different cultural and ethnic experiences? One obvious conclusion from the chapters in this volume is that literacy work across ethnic diversity needs a grounding in both cultural diversity and in-depth cultural understanding. The differences in literacy development within the African-American community, and as contrasted with other ethnic groups in the United States, are becoming increasingly clear.

More generally, it is not uncommon to hear that low levels of literacy are among the chief problems facing contemporary society, partic-

ularly school-based literacy programs in urban settings. There are numerous arguments that would support concern for such a point of view, ranging from the economic pressure on the U.S. workplace to the advent of robotics to the major problems endemic in our urban secondary schools. Literacy is a critical part of policy discussions in all of these areas; yet, it has remained difficult to determine whether more literacy or different literacy would help to alleviate the perceived problems. The distinction between "more" versus "different" seems to be at the heart of many educational concerns, especially when cultural differences are the focus of the analysis. Is literacy development among African-American youth a social problem that requires new models of understanding, a better tailoring, or greater sensitivity to the social, cultural, and linguistic dimensions inherent within that community of learners? The chapters in this volume suggest, as does much of the discourse in this area, that the more/different distinction is not new in education but that it needs to be addressed more effectively as we become aware of the important differences in literacy that exist across ethnic boundaries.

In an attempt to explore these issues in a different context (Wagner, 1991), I came to the conclusion that the cultural difference argument in literacy is particularly salient because literacy is so tightly linked to the total social lives of individuals (as distinct from their "school lives"). In this critical sense, literacy needs to be seen not only as affected by culture but also *as* culture. Literacy in contemporary society—regardless of one's level of demonstrable skill—is so much a part of life that it is inherent in the culture. This simple assertion goes a long way to explaining why it is so difficult to intervene in school-based and nonschool (i.e., adult) literacy learning. Literacy, like language and dialect use, is deeply embedded in social life, personal experience, and community expectations.

If accepted, the above argument leads to a nettlesome conclusion. Any attempt to intervene in order to change an individual's literacy status means change not only in a set of skills as measured by most tests and taught in schools but also in the behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs that define each individual, the rest of his or her community, and, ultimately, the structure of communities and societies themselves. Resistance to individual and cultural change, not a new topic in African-American studies, has remained relatively unexplored in current conversations about literacy. We may need to ask whether the very high dropout rate from school and adult literacy programs is related to such a cultural *decalage* between recipients and providers. As various policy options toward trying to improve literacy are considered, the issue of its cultural roles and attributes needs to be better understood as well. As

we have seen in this volume, literacy as a cultural entity needs to be examined carefully and understood within the African-American community by individuals who study and work in the community. Efforts to change literacy within that community will likely require integrating current uses of literacy and community identity into learning and instruction so that literacy efforts may be valued, useful, and achievable for African-American learners.

#### REFERENCE

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***Literacy Among  
African-American  
Youth***

***Issues in Learning,  
Teaching, and Schooling***

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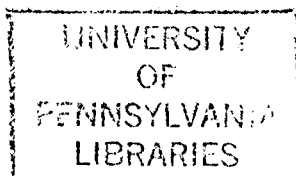
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